



Speech by Robyn Mudie, High Commissioner of Australia

Meeting of the Standing Committee of Male Parliamentarians on Prevention of Violence
against Women and Girls

20 September 2012

Taj Samudra Hotel, Colombo

Honourable Minister for Women and Child Development and Chair of the Standing Committee, Mr Tissa Karalliyadda and Honourable Deputy Minister, Mohamed Hizbullah, Members of the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development. Colleagues from UNFPA, UNICEF. Friends – Good Morning!

I am delighted to be here today at the Meeting of the Standing Committee of Male Parliamentarians on Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls. Having had a long involvement in gender issues in many different settings over many years, I can say that it is not the norm to find a forum on gender issues in which men outnumber women! It is very good to see you all here and I commend your presence.

This event is a critical contribution towards creating awareness about combating gender violence and the disturbing practice of child marriage.

It will add to the strong and effective advocacy of the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development, one of whose aims is to address, in an effective policy based way, the issue of violence against women and girls.

- The Australian Government remains a firm advocate and practical supporter of gender equality and women's empowerment, both domestically and internationally.
- In 2011, the Australian Government established **The Office of the Global Ambassador for Women and Girls**. This reflects Australia's active commitment to gender equality in the international arena – with a special focus on the Asia-Pacific region.

- Australia's Global Ambassador for Women and Girls, Penny Williams, works to ensure the empowerment of women and girls is a central focus of Australia's diplomatic, development and defence concerns.
- We have long identified gender as a critical cross-cutting theme across our **development assistance program**. Most recently, this includes:
 - a doubling of funding for family planning services in developing countries as part of efforts to support a global campaign to prevent unwanted pregnancies and save around 200,000 lives, and
 - a \$320 million initiative to improve the political, economic and social opportunities of women in the Pacific
 - And, very directly related to the event here today, the Australian Government, through AusAID, is currently funding the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development through a 3 year grant of \$ 500 000 to support the Forum's work to respond to and prevent Violence Against Women in the Asia-Pacific.
- In all of our work on gender, Australia recognises that the involvement of men and boys in understanding and promoting gender equity is critical. I am delighted therefore to be able to attend this meeting of the Standing Committee of Male Parliamentarians on the Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls. I commend your commitment to this important cause.
- The bedrock on which women's rights are based is empowerment. That is, providing women with the knowledge, ability, freedom and capacity to live their lives on an equal footing with men.
- A fundamental enabler of women's empowerment is ensuring that all women and girls can live their lives in safety, free from all forms of violence.
- We are working to prevent gender violence and assist the victims of gender violence, both overseas and at home in Australia
 - Australia's **National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security**, released earlier this year, aims to encourage greater participation of women in preventing conflict and building peace
 - In 2011, Australia announced that it will invest an additional \$96.4 million over four years for initiatives to eliminate violence against women and to support women affected by violence in developing countries

– We are making similar efforts **in our own country**, to reduce the impact of violence against women with the recent launch of a ground-breaking \$86 million **National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children**.

- The central topic of this meeting is the disturbing and destructive practice of forced marriage.
- Forced marriage is one form of violence against women.
- It is the right of every woman and man to enter into marriage with their full and free consent and at a time of their choosing.
- Early and forced marriage denies an estimated **10 million girls** every year their basic rights.
 - This is in addition to the many millions of adult women living in forced and servile marriages.
- Child marriage remains a great development challenge in South Asia, especially in the areas of **education, health** and the perpetual **cycle of poverty**.
- Australia is committed to tackling forced marriage wherever it occurs.
- We hope that your discussions over the coming two days and the framework for action on which you decide will ensure that this issue is placed firmly on the policy agenda in your own countries and across the region, and that steps can be set in place to address it in an effective way through institutional action, laws and policy.
- The momentum is building to end forced and servile marriage, inspired by the activists who are promoting change in their own communities, the brave women and girls who speak out publicly, the work of organisations such as UNFPA, UNIFEM and UNICEF, and of course the advocacy and dedication of AFPPD.
- I hope this meeting is rewarding and productive. As the Honourable Minister said, one core goal should be to close the gap between aspiration and action. In your role as Parliamentarians in your own countries and as leaders in your communities, you have the capacity to take this process forward. I hope that you will agree on practical steps to this end.
- I also hope you will be able to build stronger and better partnerships at the political and community level, and which include not just the agencies and organisations who can implement change, but the women and girls who are affected by forced marriage and the men and boys who should and can be active partners in our shared efforts to address this and other issues affecting women's rights and freedoms.

- Australia is proud to be supporting the work of the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD) and to be part of this event today.
- I wish you every success now and in the future.